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ABSTRACT

Traditional reading methods have not focused on the language of students in the classroom as an important component of teaching reading. Language researchers have discovered that expressive oral language is an important component of reading instruction. There are several suggestions for the promotion of good language development that have been derived from the research of language, including: (1) take the child's attempts to initiate conversation seriously by listening with interest to what she or he has to say; and (2) in responding, make the child's meaning the point of departure for the adult's contribution. Research has also demonstrated the effectiveness of several classroom techniques: reducing teacher talk; a conversation/interaction form of instruction; and "responsive teaching." Teachers need to promote expressive language techniques to give the best reading instruction possible to their students. (A figure presenting a transcript from a responsive teaching session is included.) (RS)

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Including Language in Reading Instruction

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Including Language in Reading Instruction

Traditional reading methods have not focused on the language of students in the classroom as an important component of teaching reading. Language researchers have discovered that expressive oral language is an important component of reading comprehension. Suggestions on how to teach reading while incorporating student oral expression are discussed.

Teaching reading is an important objective of schools, and how best to teach this skill is a source of controversy in education literature. Unfortunately, all of this interest and concern have not solved the problems of illiteracy. The National Assessment of Educational Progress has assessed the reading levels of high school graduates. As interpreted in a speech by Shanker (1987), he said their results showed that " About 85% of the people who have graduated high school in this country can read a simple comic book . . . by the time he gets to the New York Times . . . you are down to 35% of those who graduate high school. The percentage of 17 1/2 year olds about to graduate from high school who can read a simple technical manual is under 5% . . . these are the successful students . . ."

Researchers who investigated literacy have spent much time illustrating the importance of expressive oral language development as a precursor to learning how to read (Heath,1983). Wells (1987) developed a matrix composed of predictors of overall achievement in school of a 10 year old. The single best predictor of this achievement was the reading achievement of the child at 7 years old (.88

correlation). The two main predictors of reading achievement at age 7 was the child's exposure to literacy and the child's command of oral language at 5 years old (.83 multiple correlation).

Some of the most convincing evidence for the importance of language for learning to read comes from the studies of dyslexia. It was long thought that dyslexia and other reading problems stemmed from a visual perception problem but convincing evidence shows that this is not the case. Instead it is now believed that these reading problems stem from either specific linguistic deficiencies or an overall general language problem. This research as reviewed by Vellutino (1987), makes a clear case for why language needs to be addressed in the proper instruction of reading.

Although most children arrive to school with the ability to speak, they exhibit a wide range of abilities with regard to verbal expression. The children's background experiences are varied as well as their oral vocabulary. Westby (1985) discusses "decontextualization" as a problem in schools when students do not have familiarity with the content. Traditional reading programs do not necessarily have stories that are related to the child's life experiences. Many reading materials also do not deal with language within a natural situation. Both knowledge of the context of a story and the ability to communicate about the content are prerequisite skills to reading comprehension.

There are several suggestions for the promotion of good language development that have been derived from the research of language. Several researchers have developed their hypotheses from the different theories of learning. Vygotsky (1978) states that learning is an interactive process between a child and the caregiver. Learning growth takes place when the caregiver responds within the zone of proximal learning for the child. Bruner (1983) calls these responses of the caregiver "scaffolding" where the adults plays a larger part in the beginning but eventually withdraws the support as the child takes on the language role. Wells (1987) has made a comparison of various studies that investigated facilitating features of adult speech that foster language in a child. The following are principles that should guide an adult working with a child's language.

1. Take the child's attempts to initiate conversation seriously by listening with interest to what she or he has to say.

2. Because the child's utterances are often incomplete, ambiguous, or difficult to understand, take pains to make sure you have correctly interpreted his or her meaning.

3. In responding, make the child's meaning the point of departure for your contribution; your words are then more likely to match his or her understanding of the situation and so provide useful evidence for theory building and testing.

4. In deciding what to say and in selecting the form in which to say it, take into account the child's ability to comprehend. This does not mean staying always within the child's current range, for he or she needs opportunities for growth. It

does mean constantly monitoring the child's comprehension and adopting appropriate strategies to help when problems occur.

The most striking difference between a language approach and traditional reading approaches is the role of the student. Language theorists see language as an interactive activity with communication being the motivating goal. The student must be an active participant in his or her learning and engage in an negotiatory style of interaction to get at a shared meaning (Wells ,1987). Traditional reading instruction often is teacher-directed and delegates the student role as the passive recipient of information. Tharp and Gallimore (1988) reviewed a study that compared direct instruction with a conversation/interaction form of instruction. The conversation/ interaction group made large and significant gains on a test of verbal-expressive skills, while the direct instruction group did not. The conversational approach was superior in fostering expressive language skills.

There are activities teachers can do to foster language in their classrooms. Jones (1988) encourages teachers to refocus how they view talk in the classroom. He makes many suggestions that include reducing teacher talk and increasing student talk in the classroom. One way is to have open discussions where the teacher encourages exploring of new ideas, exchanging views, explaining concepts and descriptions for what they see. These discussions can begin with the teacher asking open ended questions (divergent) that promote longer responses where there is no "right" answer, rather than closed questions (convergent) that elicit brief responses and are evaluated for correctness.

Westby (1985) discusses ways to deal with the problem of decontextualized reading for students who do not have familiarity with the content and are not dealing with language within a real situation. She suggests that units be arranged around familiar topics for students or the students are given shared experiences with one topic throughout the curriculum, especially when skills are being taught. This view is also supported by Duffy (1981) who relates this to reading comprehension and states that "comprehension is created by the reader not the teacher . . . the guidance should not force the child to substitute the teacher's interpretation for his/her own."

Since language researchers see language as directly related to literacy, there have been several processes described that would promote reading instruction. Most incorporate the findings discussed so far into various reading programs. Donaldson makes many suggestions (1978) on how to prepare students for reading. She emphasizes the importance of making students more aware of the spoken tongue then making certain the child understands that print is the written version of speech. The benefits of having a written form of language should be explored.

Donaldson also explains that teachers need to give students adequate time to respond so that they can reflect upon answers.. Student errors should not be eliminated, but rather seen as opportunities for exploration and growth. The units of study should be meaningful with the smallest unit a sentence ,so context can be

used. Flashcards with sight words, a common instructional material, take words out of context and do not promote meaning and comprehension. Teachers should try to explain the reading task as a way to get information so they don't see the purpose as decoding. The child should be encouraged to ask questions so the teacher doesn't have to always detect problems on his/her own., Donaldson also gives several suggestions for how a teacher can do "assist learning" which as stated before is based on the theories of Vygotsky (1962) and Bruner (1983).

Tharp and Gallimore (1988) have devised a complete reading program that is also based on language research. It is referred to as responsive teaching and has several components. The teachers role is to assist performance in reading comprehension by helping the students to relate the text to their own experiences. Other than some prompts to assist the students in relating to their experiences (scaffolding), the teacher is supposed to let the students do the majority of the talking and give the child time to respond. The teacher should always relate his/her responses to what the student has said. The research has found this method to be effective for teaching reading comprehension.

An example of responsive teaching is illustrated by a transcript of a teacher (who has been learning this technique) and a student who is discussing a story they have just read (Figure 1). From this example, the teacher (T) does not do all of the talking and always asks questions that build on what the child has just said. Also ,the child's own experiences about showing strength were related to the text. The

child is an active participant in his or her learning and makes several contributions to the interaction.

Figure 1: Responsive Teaching Example (UCLA, 1989 handout from Gallimore)

T: Okay, what did Kuhulan say when he came over to Finnmakol's home?

S: Is Finnmakol at home?

T: Ammm.

S: She said ,"No, Finnmakol is not home. He went out to look for a giant named Kuhulan."

T: Ahum.

S: His wife said Finnmakol is stronger but he said,"I'll show you who's strong."

T: Okay. What could he do to show his strength?

S: Lift up the house.

T: Alright. How is he going to do this?

S: Use his muscles.

T: Aha.. Using that....okay. What else could he do to show his strength?

S: By sweating.

T: You show your strength by sweating? How do you show your strength by sweating?

S: You go like this. (child flexes her muscles)

T: Okay. What do you call it when you do that?

S: Show his muscles.

T: Yes. Show his muscles. But does that show how strong you are?

S: Soft muscles.

T: That you have soft or hard muscles? What could he do to show his strength?

S: Lift up a tree.

T: Lift up a tree. Sure. What else?

S: Lift up somebody's house.

T: Alright. Turn to the next two pages.....

S: [inaudible].... heavy like rocks.....two pages?

T: Yeah. Look at the next two pages.

S: Wow. He lift up the house.

Teachers modify and change their teaching methods to fit with their own personal teaching styles and the practical constraints of their classrooms. It would not be difficult for a teacher to incorporate responsive teaching into the guided practice portion of a directed lesson. Most importantly, any teacher who is instructing reading needs to be constantly concerned with promoting language in the classroom. Literacy is directly an outcome from oral language and the areas of reading, writing and oral language all need instruction and practice in the classroom. It is hoped that creative teachers will accommodate language into all areas of the curriculum, just as this has been found beneficial with reading and writing.

The students that are in our schools today, have the potential to become successful adults. It is essential these students know how to communicate with other people. The quality of one's life may be limited if there are deficiencies in one's verbal language capabilities, reading comprehension and/or writing level. For students with difficulties in reading, it is known that the cause very likely comes

from a language deficiency, delay, or difference from the language of reading. There is need for continued research, but for now teachers will need to promote expressive language techniques to give the best reading instruction possible to their students.

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